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Art in France in XX^e Century

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Art in France in XX^e Century

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Bidaine, Philippe. *L'Art contemporain*, Paris : Nouvelles éd. Scala : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2011, (Sentiers d'art)

Dagen, Philippe. *L'Art français : le XX^e siècle*, Paris : Flammarion, 2011, (Tout l'art. Histoire)

- 1 While the current day and age marked by a booming globalization is ceaselessly calling for an expansion of the field of vision where the prefixes “post” and “trans” have pride of place, the moment has come for the art historian to size up the past century. If it is time to take stock, what could be more tangible than to start with the huge art production of a single country, in this instance, France? By delivering a very dense overview, Philippe Dagen revisits French art under the sign of doubt, as he puts it, but it is a doubt that is above all rhetorical, shrewdly aimed against the methodological traps which underlie any such undertaking: “The specific nature of the 20th century is such that it makes it a duty to detach oneself from all preconditions” (p. 14). In putting forward a relentless and clear argument presented by way of introduction, the author divides, classifies and contextualizes this historical mass in accordance with the three tenses of any narrative. After a first chapter devoted to “the modern idea”, there then comes “the future”, dedicated to forward-looking artistic visions, “the past” accommodating movements of reaction, followed by “the present” marked by the explosion and movement of images. If the ideas devoted to anti-modernism and film are probably among the strongest moments, one sometimes wonders if the primary readership of this book, students, has not been forgotten in the breathless pace of the analyses, the laconic subtitles, and the lists of titles of works often missing material details. The specialist, on the other hand, appreciative of this compact narrative, might wish for more synchronic comparisons.

Despite doubt as a method, it would have been nice to feel some minimal risk taking especially with regard to the art of the century's last decade.

- 2 Like a complement, made up entirely of images, to this basic synthesis, José Alvarez's *Un XX^e siècle artistique* is presented as a vast, intentionally subjective chronology, which, down the years, reveals the extraordinary wealth of artistic and cultural activity in France. Starting with the 1900 World Fair, and closing with the death of Bernard Lamarche-Vadel in 2000, it helps us to see at a glance the concomitances and intersections between biographical facts, events, and visual inventions. Just like with Philippe Dagen, "art" is here understood in the broad sense intermingling painting, sculpture and architecture, as well as literature, theatre, design and so on.
- 3 In devoting himself to the histories of art of the second half of the 20th century, Philippe Bidaine proposes a short summary of contemporary art, this time from the international angle. Setting up known markers, the work is intended as an initial and rapid access to the subject, complete with several thematic and biographical inserts. However, to try and recapitulate "the post-1944 European scene" in half a page, and "BMPT" in a single paragraph no longer involves the feat of art of synthesis, but raises questions about the compatibility between content and editorial format.